

Endangered Languages: Preserving Quechua

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Quechua, the indigenous language of the Andes in South America, is one of the many languages that are currently considered to be endangered. The extinction of a language encompasses more than simply losing a way of speaking but rather the culture and knowledge that accompany the language. Organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work to maintain and even revitalize endangered languages through supporting the development of written texts as well as promoting the inclusion of the language in education. One way to maintain endangered languages is through bilingual education. There are many languages that are in danger of becoming extinct because they are viewed as inhibiting economic and social mobility, but preserving those languages allows others to benefit from the knowledge and culture that are intertwined with the spoken words.

According to UNESCO's framework for determining language vitality and endangerment, a language is endangered when "it is on a path towards extinction." (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). In 2003, 96 percent of the world's languages were spoken by roughly 3 percent of the world's population (UNESCO, 2003). This small percentage of speakers of almost all the world languages highlights the potential risk for losing many languages and culture. In terms of endangered languages, UNESCO states, "At least 50% of the world's more than six thousand languages are losing speakers. We estimate that about 90% of all languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the 21st century." (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). The qualifications for a language to be considered endangered include an increasingly reduced number of places where it is spoken, not passing the language on to the next generations, and when speakers simply stop using the language.

Languages become endangered for both internal and external reasons including power differential where one language is considered more valuable than another. External reasons for language endangerment include military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation (UNESCO, 2003). Internally, a population may have a negative attitude towards their own language for reasons of inferiority or lack of opportunities for economic mobility. According to Wardhaugh (2011), “all languages and all varieties of particular languages are equal in that they quite adequately serve the needs of those who use them.” (Wardhaugh, 2011, p. 356). However, this is the view of linguistics and many native speakers of languages that are considered to be inferior are not necessarily in agreement. Many choose to abandon their language and culture in hopes of improving their ability to move up the social ladder and avoid discrimination (UNESCO, 2003). Losing world languages results in the loss of culture and wisdom and should be avoided by taking the necessary precautions to preserve them. Quechua is just one of the many languages considered to be in danger of extinction.

Quechua, also referred to as Quichua in Ecuador, is spoken in South American countries that span the Andes mountain range. These countries include Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina (Kalt, 2012). It is the largest indigenous language family in the Americas and in 2012, close to 13 million people spoke the language. Linguists believe that the Quechua language originated over 2,000 years ago before the Incas established their dominance in Peru (Heggarty, 2006). The Incas chose Quechua as the official language of their empire and therefore, both strengthened and spread the language throughout South America. The spread of the language and contact with regional languages created a great diversity in the Quechua language family. Many regions have different pronunciations or linguistic variations, but the language still developed from the same original Quechua language base (Heggarty, 2006).

Today the Quechua language family is considered endangered by UNESCO's standards of language vitality. In Ecuador, only 7 percent of the population speaks the indigenous language and although Quechua is recognized by the constitution as an important part of the culture, it is not an official language of the country (Ecuador, 2013). Spanish is the main language spoken in metropolitan areas and is the language of the Catholic Church, schools, and the marketplace (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002). Quechua is not used in the national media apart from a few radio stations and as viewed as the language of poverty (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002). With the trend of Quechua speakers moving from rural areas to urban Spanish-speaking cities, there is a shift to speak Spanish and the Quechua language is disappearing.

Negative attitudes to the indigenous language are one of the internal forces that contribute to the decline of a language. UNESCO states: "Many indigenous peoples, associating their disadvantaged social position with their culture, have come to believe that their languages are not worth retaining." (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). It is often the speakers that choose to abandon the language and not pressure from dominant language speakers. Quechua is one of the languages that fall into this power differential with Spanish as the dominant language and Quechua as the minority or discriminated against language. In a 2004 study done in the Andean area, researchers found that Quechua speakers avoided the language and considered it less valuable in hopes of avoiding discrimination (Manley, 2008). The study went further to claim that the participants believed that Spanish was the dominant language and necessary for work, literacy, progress, education, and government (Manley, 2008). Quechua, on the other hand, was more commonly used in the homes for informal communication.

Another study carried out in San Antonio, which is located near the Andes in Ecuador, focused on the interpersonal use of Quechua. San Antonio is a town with around 127 households

but with a limited amount of work available for the indigenous inhabitants (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002). Therefore, many men have to commute to urban areas, where Spanish is spoken, in order to make a livelihood. When interviewed, the Quechuan Indians stated that they were proud of their language and understand its importance in relation to their culture and identity. However, the study highlighted that despite this attitude towards the language, the younger generation rarely communicates in the indigenous language. In 2002, when the ethnographic study was carried out, only a few monolingual speakers of Quechua remained (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002). These speakers, typically elderly women, were considered to be the few that speak “puro” [pure] Quechua whereas the rest of the population speaks a mixture of Spanish and Quechua. The study also showed that women commonly use Quechua when speaking to other women except for in churches, marketplaces, or schools. Men were observed speaking Spanish in the community but Quechua and Spanish were interchangeable in the house with their spouses. Parents normally address their children in Spanish in order to avoid confusing their children. Members of the community state: “if they were to employ both languages, their children would get confused and eventually enter the Hispanic school speaking *mete mete* [mixed language].” (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002, p. 733). Another reason for the lack of communication in Quechua between adults and children is because Quechua is seen to be used primarily by adults and considered to be an adult language (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002). Children are expected to adopt this language later in their lives when they are old enough to use it but they are only exposed to the language through the conversations at home.

A more recent study was conducted in 2008 that showed very different results in terms of the attitude towards the indigenous Quechua language (Manley, 2008). The researcher showed that Quechuan speakers supported bilingual education and claimed to never have avoided

speaking Quechua. Overall, the results showed a much more positive opinion of the language. This aligns with the study mentioned before that occurred in San Antonio. However, the 2008 study was done in a very different manner. The researcher looked at participants in two different organizations that supported the maintenance of the Quechuan language (Manley, 2008). Those organizations provided the participants with a safe place to speak the language and emphasized the value of the Quechuan language. Therefore, the results need to be evaluated critically in order to be applied to the population as a whole. It seems more likely that the study sampled a small population that lived in ideal communities for promoting the language rather than a picture of the entire population. The study did manage to emphasize the value of such organizations in protecting and encouraging the endangered language.

One strategy for preserving an indigenous language is to make the speakers aware that the language is valuable and that they need to protect the language as well as the culture and traditions that the language embodies. Maley (2008) refers to one of Fishman's (1991) principles for language revitalization stating: "Intergenerational continuity of the endangered language through the means of family, neighborhood and community language reinforcement—is the most difficult to achieve but absolutely crucial to the success of all language revitalization and maintenance efforts." (Manley, 2008, p. 325). Although not showing an overall improvement in attitudes towards the Quechua language, Manley's (2008) study does indicate that communities promoting language maintenance and the value of the language can in fact positively impact that language. In the study, all of the participants stated that their living situation impacted their language values by providing a place to speak the language freely (Manley, 2008).

The negative attitude towards Quechua also comes to the surface in the San Antonio study (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002). The younger generation believe that they will be successful

if they speak Spanish. The study quotes Don Pedro, the president of the community, “the children have begun to feel embarrassed about their illiterate parents, and that they at times want to silence them or do the talking for them—for instance, when they go to the market together, or when mestizos come to visit the community.” (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002, p. 737). The language is associated with “Indianness, rural life, poverty, and femininity.” (Rindstedt and Aronsson, 2002, p. 737). One quote by a preschool child in the community emphasizes the negative attitude towards Quechua: “I’m not an anacu skirt [traditional Quichuan women’s attire] Indian. I’m not a poor anacu skirt Indian. I just want to speak Spanish, What is it to me?” (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002, p. 737). Unfortunately, this quote highlights the negative opinion of the Quechua language and the economic situation that is seen as synonymous with the indigenous population. Language preservation should incorporate more than just the linguistic aspects of the language but also needs to emphasize its use in homes and communities where the language can be encouraged and respected.

The reality is that the desire for economic improvement and a migration into urban cities has led to the endangerment of the Quechua language. The question now is how to prevent the language from becoming extinct. UNESCO’s framework for language vitality consists of five areas that have the goal of protecting the endangered languages (UNESCO, 2003). The first area is basic linguistic and pedagogical training, which helps to support education in the language. The second area is sustainable development in literacy and local documentation skills. Documentation is essential for protecting a language because it preserves the language in writing. Supporting and developing national language policy is the third area of focus for protecting languages. Finally, the last two areas for protecting endangered languages include supporting and developing educational policy and improving living conditions and respect for

the speakers of the language. One method to support the language through educational policy can be done through the inclusion of bilingual schools.

Providing children with the opportunity to use their native language in education is one way to aid in the protection of a language that is in danger. Hornberger (2004) states, “multilingual language policies implemented through bilingual education can be a positive factor in answering both those needs, i.e. in enhancing children’s learning, and in promoting language maintenance and revitalization.” (Hornberger & Coronel-Molina, 2004, p. 5). UNESCO’s framework for language vitality also supports education in the native language emphasizing that, “education in the language is essential for language vitality.” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 12). Education allows the language to be passed from generation to generation and can help to improve the speakers’ attitudes towards the language as well as see the indigenous language as worthy of value.

Since the 1980s, Ecuador has seen changes in the implementation of bilingual education in schools to help promote and protect the language. Research completed in the 1970s showed that only a small percentage of indigenous children had access to education and rarely had the opportunity to complete their education if there was access (Cossío, 1991). This is due to the need for children to help with work as well as the fact that schools were not teaching in their native language and there was a disconnect between the indigenous community needs and the dominant Spanish-language curriculum. Ecuador made some attempts at implementing bilingual education throughout the 1960s and 1970s but in the 1980s, the country underwent substantial developments in linguistic policies (Cossío, 1991). Cossío (1991) points out that in 1982, Ecuador had its first bilingual schools and there were 300 schools in the country by the end of 1984.

In 1986, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador In Ecuador (CONAIE) was created to represent the indigenous communities (Cossío, 1991). This organization allowed the indigenous communities to participate by selecting literacy teachers who were to be trained by the Research Center for Indigenous Education (CIEI). Unfortunately, a changing government prevented the continuity and stability of indigenous education.

In 1989, the government officially recognized indigenous education and created the National Directorate of Bilingual Intercultural Indigenous Education (DINEIIB) (Cossío, 1991). This organization was tasked with developing, implementing, and coordinating all private and state educational activities for indigenous communities. The Quechua population was one of the main groups focused on by the DINEIIB. The role of the DINEIIB is to train teachers to be able to educate the children in all languages spoken in the country, organize education at all levels and develop the appropriate curriculum, write laws to govern national education, open communication with the dominant Spanish-speaking population, and organize adult literacy programs along with a few other responsibilities (Cossío, 1991). Training teachers is the first area of UNESCO's principles for supporting the education of the endangered language and vital for the success of bilingual education in the indigenous languages which is the last of UNESCO's principles (UNESCO, 2003).

Probably the most influential educational model in Ecuador for bilingual education was the "Macac" Educational Model, which was developed in 1978 (Cossío, 1991). The model focuses on the following: psychological and cultural revalidation, revalidation and development of indigenous forms of organization, revalidation of traditional knowledge and traditional beneficial practices, and identification of sociocultural, economic and political problems to be faced by the community (Cossío, 1991). This model focuses on the importance of improving the

attitudes about the indigenous language and culture. The “Macac” model relies on direct participation from community members in creating the material for education even though many community members never completed school. Their knowledge of the indigenous culture is essential in bilingual schools, which typically emphasize the dominant language.

Despite the need for effective educational policies for indigenous education, Ecuador will be unable to preserve the languages if the state does not follow the proposed policies. Cossío (1991) states: “This demonstrates the great inconsistency between what the people proposed, intended, and are actually doing, and what it is believed that they proposed, intended, and are doing.” (p.62). The dominant society, in this case the Spanish speaking leaders, need to compromise and accept the importance of preserving the indigenous languages in order for there to be any success. This is challenging because “in a situation in which the dominant society is accustomed to disguising its feelings, the state has a particular obligation to promote intercultural understanding by both parties, but it has as yet done nothing in this direction.” (Cossío, 1991, pp. 62-63). The inflexibility of the dominant speakers has unfortunately severely restricted and limited the implementation of bilingual education that is essential in preserving indigenous languages such as Quechua. Cossí (1991) emphasizes the importance of bilingual education, “The use of the mother tongue as the principle language of education constitutes one of the most significant advances in education and human rights.” (p. 65).

Apart from bilingual education, UNESCO’s second goal in their framework for language vitality includes incorporating written materials to provide a basis for literacy in the language (UNESCO, 2003). A general alphabet for Quechua was developed and was accepted in 1980 and encompassed all variants of the language, which was used as the basis for other indigenous languages. Documentation is essential for preserving an endangered language and through

written texts, others will be able to study the language as well as preserve it over time. Creating an alphabet and a method for literacy in Quechua is one step towards preserving the language.

The fact that by the end of the 21st century, 90% of world languages will be replaced by dominant languages is a tragedy because the culture, knowledge, and identity that are associated with those languages will be lost as well (Cossío, 1991). When Quechua speakers in Ecuador were asked about which customs were important to keep, they responded, “*Respetar y no olvidar la lengua materna. La primera lengua que es quichua. Sin eso no somos nadie, pues.*” [“To respect and not to forget our maternal language. The first language, which is Quichua. So without that we are nothing.”] (Rindstedt & Aronsson, 2002, p. 725). This quotation adequately summarizes the importance of preserving indigenous world languages because without the language, the identity of the people in the culture is often lost.

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